Reflections On Early Cannon Beach

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by
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Shortly before my brother, John Delbert Griffin, passed away in 1973, he asked me to help him compile some recollections of summers we spent as children in Cannon Beach. I am publishing this nostalgic account of those fondly remembered years in the hope that today's generation may enjoy a glimpse into a past spent at this most beautiful beach.

To Megan and Griff

Margaret Griffin Green
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Today Cannon Beach is a vacation area for thousands of persons who appreciate and love this beach for its beauty, ruggedness and recreational potential. It might be interesting to relate what it was like some 80 years ago when the major portion of the beach was first opened up for settlement, and more specifically the years following August, 1892, when my father, John N. Griffin of Astoria, acquired right and title to a Government homestead claim of 160 acres from R.E. McGuire and his wife Rosetta McGuire.

Naturally the encroachment of civilization has left its scars. No longer does the beach have the green virgin forest background, logging has taken care of that; nor do we have the bountiful supply of clams and crabs gathered without thought of restrictions. Much of the former marine life on the rocks has ceased to be or has been wantonly destroyed, and lovely shells once so plentiful no longer are to be found. But the beach still has its promontory rocks and unusual singing sand, the tide still comes in and goes out and the charm and beauty are there.

Now one can drive from Astoria to Cannon Beach in less than an hour so it is difficult to realize that in the early days it took the greater part of a day, traveling first by boat from Astoria,

then train, followed by a thrilling ride in a wagon drawn by horses over the rough road from Seaside to Elk Creek. It was a momentous occasion when our family was packed and ready for a stay through the summer until the fall opening of school. The stage driver was always a rugged character using much profanity when addressing the four horses required for the trip.

The road at that time practically followed the old Indian Trail from Seaside to Cannon Beach, winding through low ravines until approaching the climb up Tillamook Head, then straight down a rather perilous descent to the mouth of the Elk Creek River where the Logan House was located. The first few miles out of Seaside were quite easy going although at one point we had to ford the Necanicum River, later reaching the Halfway house where we stopped to water the horses. This house was merely a shack and we called it the "inside-out-house" because the two by four timbers were exposed and lacked any outside covering. In the spring after winter rains the mud was quite an obstacle, reaching sometimes to the hubs of the wagon, and the road was so narrow there were few turnouts for passing. The driver would halt at intervals and give forth a bellow which echoed and re-echoed. If there was no response he knew the road was clear and would proceed. As a youngster I liked to sit with the teamster on the driver's seat and remember one time when we hit a bad rut the wagon gave a lurch and over I went, landing behind the rear horses. Luckily they did not move and I was unharmed except for a mud bath. At Elk Creek we stopped to wait for the tide to be low enough to ford the mouth since of course there was o bridge in those days. This crossing was often hazardous and the driver had to exert great skill. A few times the water proved to be deeper than anticipated and came into the wagon drenching passengers, baggage and supplies. Once across, however, the water soon drained and it was a joy to hit the smooth hard sand, see Haystack Rock and enjoy the fast trot on the beach four miles to our cottage where we unloaded and we children took off shoes and socks, never to put them on again until fall.

Mike Powers and the Homestead

It seems only natural to place these together as they were linked unforgettably in my memory of the early years I spent at Cannon Beach when a youngster. As I said earlier, Father acquired our place from the McGuires who for some reason decided not to file on the claim. The burden then fell upon Father to prove up, clear ground, build a house and otherwise improve the property, and most fortunately for all of us, he found sea-loving Irish Mike Powers. Mike was a logger who worked in the woods during the summer, so from late fall until late spring this hardworking rough old bachelor felled trees, cleared the knoll where in 1900 the second house was built, and planted a surprise vegetable garden for our summer use. There were beautiful heads of cabbage and cauliflower, as well as potatoes, onions and carrots, and one summer we had a strawberry patch. Undoubtedly the ocean water had considerably to do with the fertility of that soil, since during winter storms waves would dash over that portion of the ground and ocean water contains many plant food elements. My father would spend an occasional weekend taking supplies to Mike and giving him a hand with the clearing, and on rainy days during the winter Mike displayed an artistic quality not always associated with such a rugged individual. I remember one time he built a small rustic rail fence around the front of the house enclosing a flower garden with a shell path leading to it. Another time he formed panels on both sides of the rather large fireplace, placing hundreds of shells in a sand and clay substance on these panels. It created an unusual and pleasing effect.

Essentially, however, Mike was a woodsman and spent most of his time falling trees, slashing and burning. Spruce had no value in those days, just something to get rid of and burning was the only method. After the tree was felled and limbed, Mike would start boring holes using an auger. He would bore a hole from the top to about center and then another from the

side to meet it. Then dropping a redhot coal down from the top he used bellows to start a draft to encourage the fire. Fires were burning all over the place but no fire wardens patrolled in those days. Tools in common use were the peavy, brush-hook, sledge, wedges, and of course axes and crosscut saws; a scythe was our lawnmower. The implement I vividly remember was the old-fashioned grindstone set upon a frame with a foot pedal device and a stick topped with a can that would drop water on the stone as it turned. I was always more than happy to accommodate anyone who needed a tool sharpened. What Mike could have done with a modern day chain saw! Thirty-five years later I saw him again. He was back at Cannon Beach brushing out streets in a subdivision my father was interested in. He had a deep feeling for Cannon Beach and just had to come back.

The first thing that confronts a person taking up a homestead is shelter, a shack, cabin or type of house, the size and quality depending on money and availability of material. I believe my father felt he should derive as much as possible from the land and what nature had provided rather than have materials brought in from the outside which was both difficult and expensive. The beach, particularly after a storm, often was a source of supply and useable planks and beams frequently would be washed ashore. About 50 or 60 feet from the shoreline on our place stood a tree, a spruce, straight and surprisingly free of bad limbs and burls, measuring about 6 or 7 feet through at the base. It is hard to understand how a tree could grow so straight and tall so close to the ocean exposed to the extremely strong winds of the storms. This tree provided the material, boards, shakes, etc., all hand split of course, that went into the first real house built on our homestead. Mike was the architect and builder of that project and it required a lot of hard work and ingenuity. The house contained a living room with fireplace, three bedrooms and kitchen, and everything, including the bedsteads, large kitchen table, flooring and chairs came out of that tree. The kitchen stove and two rocking chairs

were the only items brought from the outside. Each year when we arrived, hopefully on a sunny day in June, the first order was to get out the scythe, cut the long grass, let it dry a bit, and then all hands would stuff it into striped cotton tickings and these served as our mattresses. Each morning they would be shaken and the beds made up. It was like sleeping on a hay-mow and just as fragrant.

During those early years we had the basic foods, beans, rice, macaroni and dried fruits such as peaches, apricots, prunes and apples. Mother made a wonderfully good pie out of the native salal-berry with a few dried apples for tartness. We also picked quantities of huckleberries.

After the house was built on the knoll there were times when I went to the beach with Father to get the house in readiness for the rest of the family who would arrive the next day. It was quite a chore as the previous fall we had stored blankets, kitchen utensils and non-perishable foods in the loft above the living room. None of this was ever disturbed although many times during the winter the house would be broken into by travelers stranded by the tide or darkness. Greasy decks of cards, empty whiskey bottles and broken window panes were left as evidence.

After our chores were done and the house pretty much in readiness, Father would prepare his favorite meal of bacon, potatoes and onions cooked in a skillet. Shad was a fish he was fond of and there was little demand for it then although today it is a popular item and the shad roe very expensive. Salt salmon tips were another of his favorites and he always provided a keg of these for Sunday morning breakfasts. One time in order to economize on wood for cooking, he had constructed a cooker or hot-box as it was called. Bottom plates of metal were heated, the food containers placed on them, the box sealed and in three or four hours the cooking was completed. Later on he purchased a three-compartment cooker. We thought it was wonderful.

Recreation

The beach during the early years we spent there was pretty much as the Indians had left it; primitive, unspoiled with everything in abundance, including clams, crabs, mussels and fish. There were few tourists, but a few vacationers would arrive and camp for a week or so, and we always entertained friends from time to time. We children never knew a dull moment; the beach was our playground and we improvised our activity or recreation. As we grew older we turned our energies to gathering stove and fireplace wood and carried buckets of water from a spring to the house for drinking and cooking. The water was clear, pure and cold and the spring served as our refrigerator. We also built many a huge tepee-like bonfire, spending most of a day gathering logs and driftwood so plentiful then. An evening spent around a fire like that was always a highlight.

Since walking was our only means of transportation we planned several picnics which took us from home for the day. A favorite was spent at Arch Cape some four miles distant, but the one we really looked forward to was walking the five miles to Ecola. We would leave our house on an early low tide and spend the day exploring the fascinating rocks and paths to Ecola Point, visiting with the Lewis and Flanders families who had handsome summer homes there, and then enjoy the homeward trek in the late afternoon.

I enjoyed clamming and crabbing above all activities. I had a bike with a small cart attached and nearly always got my share of shellfish even getting soaked to the neck sometimes when the crabs were in deep holes. Of course the ocean was our bathtub and a daily event was a dip in the surf, always followed by a welcome drink of delicious mussel nectar. Mussels were plentiful on the rocks and we loved to look for the pearls in the big ones. Mussels produce pearls as oysters do although they are inferior in quality.

The Toll Road

As the town of Astoria grew and Seaside became a well-known resort, more travelers went over the road to Elk Creek, and many ventured on foot or horseback down the coast to Tillamook. Gradually this former trail became a road of sorts, a "Toll Road" which practically followed the old Indian trail over Tillamook Head. This road was built by donations and labor of some of the pioneers who wanted to homestead on the beach, and it was essential that they have access to Seaside for their supplies. It was not until about 1903 that Clatsop County took over and built a road following the old Toll Road to some extent. The County rebuilt the road several times and a bridge was constructed across Elk Creek which brought growth to the little village on the south side of the river. Mark Warren, one of the early pioneers, built the Warren Hotel in Tolovana Park. It was a two-story log hotel which featured a massive rock fireplace about nine feet across. It required a special dory to bring in back-logs for it. His wife was a very good cook and they accommodated many guests from Portland and elsewhere.

The Pioneers

There were few places on the beach that offered any substantive opportunities from an agricultural standpoint. The terrain was rough, mountainous and covered with virgin timber, so the homesteader who planned to live there found it pretty hard going. The beach did provide shellfish; clams, mussels and crabs, and there were many elk and deer in the forest. When the entire beach was thrown open for settlement about 1889 or 1890, claims of 160 acres were taken up along the beach to just beyond Arch Cape. The Government established a post office on the Austin property south of Hug Point and the mail then went through to Tillamook from northern points.

Approximately fourteen early settlers took up claims along this portion of the beach from what is now the Tolovana Park

area south to Arch Cape. Among this group were a few families and a number of bachelors who had come over from England and were known as "remittance men." The family homesteaders included the Brailliers, Mansurs, Claytons, Adairs, Carnahans, Sabines, Austins and Griffins. The permanent settlers along the beach were the real backbone of the sparsely settled community, hardworking, industrious people, some of whom managed to farm on their claims. The Brailliers, located in Tolovana Park, established a small dairy herd which furnished milk to neighbors and the Austins kept several cows, had chickens and always maintained a large vegetable garden. My sister Margaret and I daily walked the two miles to Austins for fresh milk, taking to the trail over Hug Point when the tide was high.

The bachelor contingent included F. Norris, James Mayar, Harry Bell, R.F.C. (Jack) Astbury and Joe Walsh. The two characters who stand out in my memory were James Mayar, a typical Irishman, and Joe Walsh, who was from England.

Mayar had a small cabin on a claim just north of Silver Point. He was known, at least to most of us, as "Jimmy the Tough" and his looks certainly verified the name. He was not too industrious and his principal pastime was fishing. Whenever a low morning tide permitted, he would go out to Jocky Cap and fish throughout the day, catching mostly black cod, then on the low evening tide he would swim and wade back to the beach. The next day he would peddle his fish to the settlers in that area. We often said he looked as though he had let his clothes dry on him but he was very friendly and generous despite his tough appearance.

The other character was Joe Walsh. His was an exceptionally fine claim just north of Arch Cape which included considerable bottom land. He stocked a few cattle and had a couple of small houses. His cabin was very neat and he was well liked but Joe did have his vices. For these young bachelors it was a rather solitary existence and it was only natural for them to get together for a session of poker and drinking. Seaside was the

only place near enough for recreation or entertainment and Seaside was some twelve miles away, but in those days twelve miles did not discourage men who depended almost entirely on walking everywhere. At any rate whenever a remittance check arrived, Joe Walsh usually took off for Seaside. He owned an old nag of a horse who knew the beach and the trails over the points as well as Joe did, so no matter how drunk he would get, Joe could rely on his horse to get him safely home. I remember one time the tide was well in and here came Joe on his horse dragging through the soft sand and the driftlogs. Just as he reached our place Joe fell off his horse. I had a pretty difficult time trying to get him back on and finally persuaded him to crawl on top of a log, and with the horse next to the log he managed to lift himself into the saddle and they went on their way. Joe Walsh had a very deep feeling for Cannon Beach, and from the time he left England as a young man spent his entire life on the beach.

On the other hand, Jack Astbury stood out from the others. He was a real English gentleman of good background and education. Even his house showed good taste and artistry. He had a flair for the social events in Seaside and Astoria and became most popular. He later moved to Portland and died there. Harry Bell was another very fine person, an engineer who later surveyed much of the property along the beach.

The Austin House

There were two hotels at Cannon Beach before 1900. The Logan House (later the Elk Creek Hotel), located on the north side of Elk Creek at the end of the Toll Road, and the Austin House which was on a nice piece of ground about half a mile south of Hug Point. The Logan House was larger and had more accommodations but the Austin House, a sort of rambling structure, was unique with more local color and much activity. When the United States Post Office Department made Mr. Austin Postmaster, the mail run was started from Seaside to

Tillamook and the two carriers met at Austins to exchange mail sacks. Too much praise cannot be given those early day carriers as the travel was hazardous, especially during the winter months when storms prevented use of the beach and they were forced to use the trails over Arch Cape, Short Sand Beach, False Tillamook, Humbug and Hug Points. During the summer the Seaside carrier usually traveled in a light buckboard, bringing supplies as well as mail to the beach dwellers and his daily coming was a big event. I believe the first mail carrier from Seaside to Cannon Beach was John Gerritse. Both carriers had to use saddle horses during the winter months. One time I stayed overnight in Seaside with the Gerritse family in order to ride with him early the next morning and open our house at Cannon Beach. That was often my job. Many times, however, I walked the entire distance with a pack on my back. When Mr. Gerritse passed away, his wife took over the mail route and she later moved to Cannon Beach where she lived for many years.

Hug Point has always been a natural barrier to the area south and it is interesting to know how Hug Point got its name. Projecting into the ocean as it does, one could walk around on foot if the tide was low. A good deal of its composition is sandstone which made it possible to dig hand and footholds on the face of the rock allowing a person to climb to a shallow ledge and facing the rock go from one indentation to another literally embracing or hugging the rocky cliff. Years later a crude road was blasted around the point and used for some time. The men who were driving teams with freight and passengers to the Austin House were experts and very familiar with the beach, the vagaries of the tide and where the sandbars usually were, but due to storms it was frequently necessary to stay overnight. A large barn stood on a knoll back of the house and had good accommodations for both men and horses.

Mr. Austin died a short time after he was appointed Postmaster and Mrs. Austin was appointed to succeed him. She was a very capable woman and was noted for her excellent cooking which was served family style on a long table. There were

nearly always travelers coming either afoot or on horseback on the way to Seaside or Tillamook and she also had vacationers from Portland and Astoria. I vividly remember the lovely flowers she grew, and a charming arbor covered with honeysuckle. I spent a week there when a boy and was impressed by the rustic summer house, the hanging baskets, ferns and the shell paths with a background of gnarled, wind-stunted spruce trees. It is hard to describe the house but it was homey, quaint and inviting, and Mrs. Austin often played on an old reed organ.

An ex-teamster named Knight lived with the Austins and was a much needed handy man who was also good with horses. He intended to make his home there permanently but fate intervened. He was walking through the arches at Arch Cape and a rock fell on him killing him instantly. He was buried on the knoll behind the Austin farm. The cannon, of which more later, was mounted on a wooden frame and became the point of interest to all who visited the Austins. Years later it was moved to a spot near the State Highway and marked with a commemorative plaque. In 1972 a marker honoring the first Cannon Beach post office was placed on the site of the Austin farm near the beach.

Living off the Land

I think of my father as a conservationist and he certainly did not believe in waste. He was always generous and gave us everything we needed but not always everything we wanted. Just as he built the pioneer beach home out of that tree, he expected to utilize as much as possible of what the beach provided. Every day we walked the high tide to see what had washed ashore and would often find lumber, various kinds of casks, and many of the old wooden floats from fish nets. Father always came from Astoria for weekends, usually walking the entire distance from Seaside, and always brought a large bag of candy and some fresh meat, both luxuries. We youngsters were

on the lookout for him and would walk as far as Silver Point to watch for his arrival. He was an ardent fisherman and would catch trout in Elk Creek or Arch Cape Creek and pogies and perch in the ocean off Hug and Humbug Points. I always went along. The Elk Creek trip would take all day as we would start back through dense woods up the Humbug ridge, then over the divide down into Elk Creek canyon, a beautiful isolated spot where very few ever ventured. We would fish upstream for a mile or so, then downstream to where the old Anderson Trail led to the beach in the vicinity of Tolovana Park. Naturally we had trout for dinner that night.

Mother was a good cook and we had clams and crabs in various ways. Her clam chowder was thick with clams and her baked deviled crab something to be remembered.

In referring to the early homesteaders on Cannon Beach I should not overlook two, whose names I cannot remember, but who in many respects must be set apart from the others. They created homes out of a wilderness homesite that were to be permanent. One was located about one-half mile back of Arch Cape and the other was on Elk Creek to the rear of Tolovana Park. Rough trails led to these homes and frequently we would walk in over the trail and buy vegetables. Fruit trees had been planted and they had the usual farm animals. Meat was no problem with elk and deer in abundance. Each farm was a small oasis in the wilderness. I feel there is something to be learned from these hardy people, pioneers who were self-reliant and had the will to take advantage of what nature provided without outside assistance. Today we have our pioneers: pioneers in industry, science, agriculture, et cetera. We had these also in the early days but today the real pioneer spirit seems to have been lost and most of us feel that money is a necessity for any time of recreation which makes life more pleasurable. While we would not want to exchange our present day living for the hardships of the old days, there are times when we might profit from the Homestead Pioneer and his example of self-reliance, fortitude and spirit.

The Shipwreck

No reminiscence of Cannon Beach and its early history would be complete without telling how the beach got its name. It was in September of 1846 that the U.S. Cruiser "Shark" was wrecked while leaving the Columbia River, and part of the vessel, the foredeck with three cannon attached, washed ashore a short distance south of Hug Point. Only Indians, segments of the Clatsop tribe, inhabited the beach then and they sent word to Astoria, a small village at that time, where the crew of the "Shark" was quartered. Fortunately there had been no loss of life. A contingent of men led by the Indians went over the trail from Seaside to the spot where the wreck was beached. They labored and managed to free the three cannon from the deck but did not reckon with the tide, and before the cannon could be hauled away the tide came in and by morning the three cannon had completely disappeared. It was many years later that one cannon reappeared and was taken to the yard of the Austin House. It is not too widely known that there are still two cannon buried deep in the sand but this can be verified by records on file at the Oregon Historical Society in Portland, Oregon.

Prior to 1890 little authentic information is available concerning the settlement on the north side of Elk Creek known for a time as Ecola, but now Cannon Beach. Earlier the Indians inhabited the area and at one time it was reported that a large whale drifted in near the mouth of Elk Creek and caused considerable excitement. Many walked over the trail from Seaside to take a look at the mammal, the Indian name for which is Ecola. The Indians were of the Clatsop tribe and several shell beds on the banks bordering the beach gave evidence of their occupation. One I remember well was just north of Humbug Point. It was five or six feet deep and many feet wide, and composed mainly of clam and mussel shells, which must have taken many years to accumulate. About one-half mile off shore from this spot are the Whale Rocks and it is said that the Indians would paddle out to these rocks in canoes at low tide

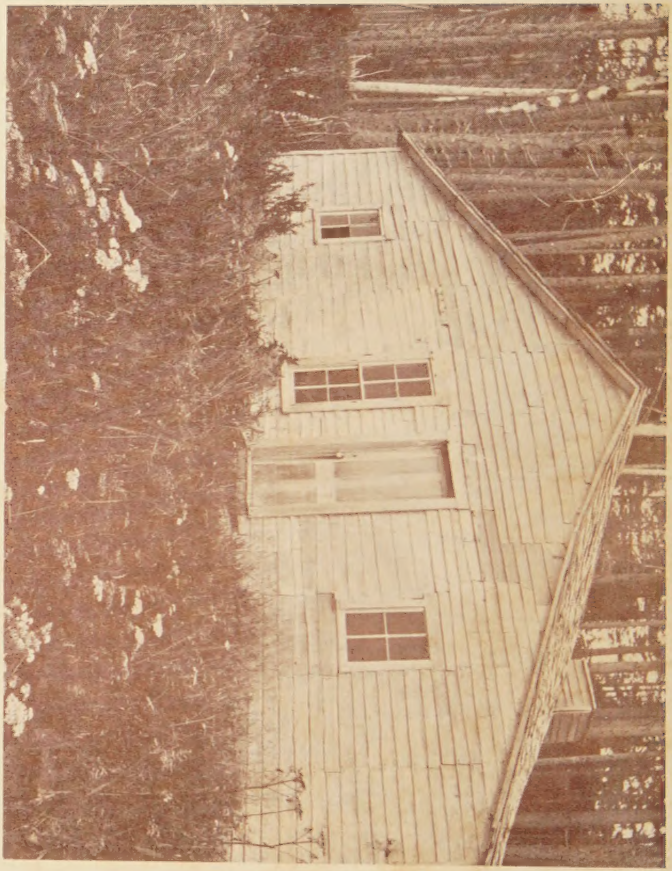
and gather animal life. On one such trip a storm came up and all were drowned when their canoes capsized. Of the various Indians in early days I remember one named Indian Louie and another called Coultrie, both of whom had claims south of Arch Cape possibly in what is now the Cove.

In 1921 Father built a second house on the knoll. It was a two story house with large living room, dining room, kitchen and bath on the first floor and four bedrooms on the second. An interesting feature of the living room was a large stone fireplace built of rocks found on the beach, and there were very few times when there was not a roaring fire to ward off the chill of the beach weather.

The bath was a shower room added some time later when we had put in running water, in those days a luxury. In the 1940's electricity was brought down the highway so again we bowed to modernization and convenience, but always kept candles and kerosene lamps just in case.

Cannon Beach was unspoiled, still largely as the Indians had left it, when Father first went there in 1892, but from then on the encroachment of civilization began. Today with the passage of time wonderful highways have been constructed, utilities established and Cannon Beach is accessible to thousands of tourists and visitors. Many retired persons have built permanent homes there, but I cannot help but reflect on those pioneer days and am glad I lived at that time when the beach was primitive, without shellfish regulations, before the invasion of automobiles, and where we were able to enjoy in complete freedom the natural state of this beautiful beach.

Changes, however, are inevitable and sometimes sad. Our family, after five generations, from our grandmother to my sister's two grandchildren, had enjoyed our Cannon Beach home, so it was with reluctance and regret that in 1972 we decided to dispose of it. Our well-remembered heritage has recently passed into other hands and we can only hope that they too will love the unceasing beauty of Cannon Beach which civilization can never really destroy.



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